

Magazine | ANDREW MARTINEZ | B. 1972

The Naked Guy

By JASON ZENGERLE DEC. 31, 2006

Andrew Martinez wanted to be called the Militant Nudist, but the nickname never stuck. He was simply too gentle, too agreeable for it. In the summer of 1990, when he was 17 and had fallen under the nonconformist spell of Henry David Thoreau, Martinez took off his clothes in public for the first time. But before he did, he went door to door, fully clothed, in his hometown, Cupertino, Calif., to ask his neighbors if they would mind. Soon he was walking down Highway 9 wearing nothing but a backpack and a sign that read, “I was born naked and so were you.” He made it about a mile and a half before the police stopped him and asked him to put on some clothes, which he obligingly did.

Later, as a student at the University of California at Berkeley, Martinez came to be known by a moniker as straightforward and genial as he was: the Naked Guy. He ate his meals nude. He went to parties nude. He even attended class nude. Berkeley being Berkeley, few people took offense. It didn’t hurt that Martinez had bronze skin and a tall, muscular body (he played football in high school and was a member of the judo team in college). Still, he tried to be considerate of those who were discomfited by his nudity, carrying a bandanna or briefs to cover up when he felt the situation called for it and making sure to spread a sweatshirt on his chair before sitting down in class.

It was easy to dismiss his behavior as a silly stunt, but to those who knew him, Martinez was guided by an endearing, if naïve, sort of undergraduate idealism. Raised in a family that refused to buy clothing with designer labels, he

now argued that all clothes were a form of repression and that by not wearing them he was making people think about the coercive nature of convention. “Our purpose is to prove that people define normalcy in their own terms,” Martinez said at a “nude-in” he staged in 1992 at Berkeley, during which more than two dozen people disrobed.

The nude-in made the Naked Guy a media favorite. The feminist writer Naomi Wolf hailed Martinez for making himself “more vulnerable to the eye than women were.” Playgirl magazine photographed him. And tabloid TV hosts like Montel Williams and Maury Povich had him as a guest on their shows. That Martinez was invited on these programs mainly to be mocked didn’t seem to bother him. He’d gamely take his seat alongside his fellow guests — sex enthusiasts and porn stars — and patiently, almost sheepishly, explain his cause. Martinez came off not as a freak but as a sweet kid. He wasn’t destined for “a middle-class office job kind of thing,” as he conceded during one interview, but it seemed likely that after his 15 minutes of fame he’d go on to become a community activist, or perhaps an organic farmer.

Eventually the media tired of Martinez. And so did Berkeley: in the fall of 1992, the school instituted a dress code mandating that students wear clothing in public. Martinez quickly ran afoul of the rule, and after he showed up naked for a disciplinary hearing, he was expelled.

Martinez stuck around the city, hanging out in People’s Park and strolling along Telegraph Avenue, but he wasn’t the same Naked Guy as before. Friends noticed that something was amiss: Martinez had become angry — angry about his expulsion, angry that the media had moved on to other stories, angry that no rich nudist had come forward to bankroll the lawsuit he wanted to file against the university. He started to talk of sinister forces, like the C.I.A., that he claimed were trying to thwart him. He felt ostracized. “I merely need to take off a four-ounce piece of cotton and reveal something that I have, everyone knows I have, half of the population has as well, to change from an average 20-year-old guy to a sex-offending criminal,” he wrote in a book manuscript that was never published.

He began to wander Berkeley pushing a shopping cart filled with rocks. He'd place the rocks at major intersections, trying to disrupt traffic, and he'd make piles of them all over the city so that, as he explained to his girlfriend at the time, "people would have weapons for when the revolution comes." He seemed to seek out confrontations with the police, once luring them to the co-op where he lived and pelting them with compost. He was arrested on multiple occasions.

After a period, Martinez left Berkeley and moved back to Cupertino to live with his mother and stepfather. Although he no longer went naked in public, his erratic behavior continued, and schizophrenia was eventually diagnosed. He spent the next decade shuttling between jails and mental-health institutions. In January he was living in a halfway house not far from his childhood home when he had a confrontation with a guard. He was charged with battery and assault with a deadly weapon and was placed in solitary confinement in the maximum-security section of the Santa Clara County jail to await trial. One night in May, alone in his cell, he put a plastic bag over his head, tied it around his neck with a bedsheet and suffocated himself.

Until his death, Martinez's family and friends did their best to keep his mental illness a secret. This was at his request. "Andrew did not want people to know about his illness," his mother said, "because then they would think he was crazy the whole time." In his moments of lucidity, there was one thing he desperately wanted to convey: "When he was the Naked Guy," one friend said, "he was completely sane."